

**James Madison to J. K. Paulding, April, 1831.
Transcription: The Writings of James Madison,
ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons,
1900-1910.**

TO J. K. PAULDING. MAD. MSS.

Montpr., Apl—, 1831.

Dear Sir I have recd. your letter of the 6th inst; and feel myself very safe in joining your other friends in their advice on the Biographical undertaking you meditate. The plan you adopt is a valuable improvement on the prevailing examples, which have too much usurped the functions of the historian; and by omitting the private features of character, and anecdotes, which as condiments, always add flavour, and sometimes nutrition to the repast, have forfeited much of the due attraction. The more historical mode has been recommended, probably by the more ready command of materials, such as abound in the contributions of the Press, & in the public archives. In a task properly biographical, the difficulty lies in the evanescent or inaccessible information which it particularly requires. Autographic memorials are rare, and usually deficient on essential points, if not otherwise faulty; and at the late periods of life the most knowing witnesses may have descended to the tomb, or their memories become no longer faithful depositories. Where oral tradition is the resort, all know the uncertainties, and inaccuracies which beset it.

I ought certainly to be flattered by finding my name on the list of subjects you have selected; and particularly so, as I can say with perfect sincerity, there is no one, to whose justice, judgment, and every other requisite, I could more willingly confide, whatever of posthumous pretension, my career thro' an eventful period, may have, to a conservative

Library of Congress

notice. Yet I feel the awkwardness of attempting “a sketch of the principal incidents of my life,” such as the partiality of your friendship has prompted you to request. Towards a compliance with your object I may avail myself of a paper, tho' too meagre even for the name of a sketch, wch. was very reluctantly but unavoidably drawn up a few years ago for an absortive biography. Whether I shall be able to give it any amplification, is too uncertain to admit a promise.¹ My life has been so much of a public one, that any review of it must mainly consist, of the agency which was my lot in public transactions; and of that agency the portions probably the most acceptable to general curiosity, are to be found in my manuscript preservations of some of those transactions, and in the epistolary communications to confidential friends made at the time & on the spot, whilst I was a member of Political Bodies, General or Local. My judgment has accorded with my inclination that any publicity, of which selections from this miscellany may be thought worthy, should await a posthumous date. The printed effusions of my pen are either known or of but little bulk.

¹ The paper to which he refers he probably destroyed. It is not among his MSS.

For portraits of the several characters you allude to, I know not that I can furnish your canvas with any important materials not equally within your reach, as I am sure that you do not need if I could supply any aid to your pencil in the use of them. Everything relating to Washington is already known to the world, or will soon be made known thro' Mr. Sparks; with the exception of some of those inside views of character and scenes of domestic life which are apart from ordinary opportunities of observation. And it may be presumed that interesting lights will be let in even on those exceptions through the private correspondences in the hands of Mr. Sparks.

Of Franklin I had no personal knowledge till we served together in the Federal Convention of 1787, and the part he took there has found its way to the public, with the exception of a few anecdotes which belong to the unveiled part of the proceedings of that Assembly. He

Library of Congress

has written his own life, and no man had a finer one to write, or a better title to be himself the writer. There is eno' of blank however for a succeeding pen.

With Mr. Jefferson I was not acquainted till we met as members of the first Revolutionary Legislature of Virginia, in 1776. I had of course no personal knowledge of his early life. Of his public career, the records of his Country give ample information and of the general features of his character with much of his private habits, and of his peculiar opinions, his writings before the world to which additions are not improbable, are equally explanatory. The obituary Eulogiums, multiplied by the Epoch & other coincidences of his death,

are a field where some things not unworthy of notice may perhaps be gleaned. It may on the whole be truly said of him, that he was greatly eminent for the comprehensiveness & fertility of his genius, for the vast extent & rich variety of his acquirements; and particularly distinguished by the philosophic impress left on every subject which he touched. Nor was he less distinguished for an early & uniform devotion to the cause of liberty, and systematic preference of a form of Govt. squared in the strictest degree to the equal rights of man. In the social & domestic spheres, he was a model of the virtues & manners which most adorn them.

In relation to Mr. John Adams, I had no personal knowledge of him, till he became V. President of the U. S. and then saw no side of his private character which was not visible to all; whilst my chief knowledge of his public Character & career was acquired by means now accessible, or becoming so to all. His private papers are said to be voluminous; and when opened to public view, will doubtless be of much avail to a biographer. His official correspondence during the Revolutionary period, just published will be found interesting both in a historical & biographical view. That he had a mind rich in ideas of his own, as well as its learned store; with an ardent love of Country, and the merit of being a colossal champion of its Independence, must be allowed by those most offended by the alloy in his Republicanism, and the fervors and flights originating in his moral temperament.

Library of Congress

Of Mr. Hamilton, I ought perhaps to speak with some restraint, though my feelings assure me, that no recollection of political collisions, could control the justice due to his memory. That he possessed intellectual powers of the first order, and the moral qualifications of integrity & honor in a captivating degree, has been decreed to him by a suffrage now universal. If his Theory of Govt. deviated from the Republican Standard, he had the candor to avow it, and the greater merit of cooperating faithfully in maturing & supporting a system which was not his choice. The criticism to which his share in the administration of it, was most liable was, that it had the aspect of an effort to give to the instrument a constructive & practical bearing not warranted by its true & intended character. It is said that his private files have been opened to a friend who is charged with the task you contemplate. If he be not a Citizen of N. York, it is probable that in collecting private materials from other sources your opportunities may be more than equal to his.

I will, on this occasion take the liberty to correct a statement of Mr. H. which contradicts mine on the same subject; and which as mine, if erroneous could not be ascribed to a lapse of memory, might otherwise be an impeachment of my veracity. I allude to the discrepancy between the memorandum given by Mr. H. to Mr. Benson, distributing the Nos. of the "Federalist" to the respective writers, and the distribution communicated by me at an early day to a particular friend, & finally to Mr. Gideon for his Edition of the Work at Washington a few years ago.¹

¹ See *ante*, Vol. VIII., 408 *et seq.*; also *The Authorship of the Federalist*, by Edward Gaylord Bourne, *Am. Hist. Rev.*, ii., 443.

The reality of errors in the statement of Mr. H. appears from an internal evidence in some of the papers. Take for an example No. 49, which contains a Eulogy on Mr. Jn, marking more of the warm feelings of personal friendship in the writer, than at any time belonged to Mr. Hamilton. But there is proof of another sort in No. 64, ascribed in the memorandum to Mr. H. That it was written by Mr. Jay, is shewn by a passage in his Life by Delaplaine, obviously derived directly or indirectly from Mr. Jay himself. There is a like proof that N.

Library of Congress

54, ascribed to Mr. Jay, was not written by him. Nor is it difficult to account for errors in the memorandum, if recurrence be had to the moment at which a promise of such a one was fulfilled; to the lumping manner in which it was made out; and to the period of time, not less than years, between the date of the "Federalist," and that of the memorandum; And as a proof of the fallibility to which the memory of Mr. H. was occasionally subject, a case may be referred to so decisive as to dispense with every other. In the year [1803] Mr. H., in a letter answering an inquiry of Col. Pickering concerning the plan of Govt. which he had espoused in the Convention of 1787, states that at the close of the Convention he put into my hands a draught of a Constitution; and in that draught he had proposed a "President for three years." [See the letter in Niles's Register.¹] Now the fact is that in that plan, the original of which I ascertained several years ago to be among his papers, *the tenure of office* for the President is not 3 years, *but during good behaviour*. The error is the more remarkable, as the letter apologizes, according to my recollection, for its being not a prompt one; and as it is so much at variance with the known cast of Mr. H's political tenets, that it must have astonished his political & most of all his intimate friends. I shd. do injustice nevertheless to myself as well as to Mr. H. if I did not express my perfect confidence that the misstatement was involuntary, and that he was incapable of any that was not so.

¹ The letter is in *The Works of Hamilton* (Lodge), Federal Edition, x., 446.

I am sorry sir that I could not make a better contribution to your fund of biographical matter. Accept it as an evidence at least of my respect for your wishes; & with it the cordial remembrances & regards in which Mrs. M. joins me as I do her in the request to be favorably presented to Mrs. Paulding.

Much curiosity & some comment have been excited by the marvellous [similarity] in a Plan of Govt. proposed by Chs. Pinckney in the Convn. of 1787, as published in the Journals with the text of the Constitution as finally agreed to. I find among my pamphlets a copy of a small one entitled "Observations on the Plan of Govt. submitted to the Fedl. Convention in

Library of Congress

Phila. on the 28th of May by Mr. C. P. a Delegate from S. C. delivered at different times in the Convention.”

My Copy is so defaced & mutilated that it is impossible to make out eno' of the Plan as referred to in the Observation, for a due comparison of it, with that presented in the Journal. The pamphlet was printed in N. Y. by Francis Childs. The year is effaced: It must have been not very long after the close of the Convention, and with the sanction at least of Mr. P. himself. It has occurred that a copy may be attainable at the Printing office if still kept up, or examined in some of the Libraries, or Historical Collections in the City. When you can snatch a moment in y. walks with other views; for a call at such places, you will promote an object of some little interest as well as delicacy, by ascertaining whether the article in question can be met with. I have among my manuscript papers, Lights on the subject. The pamphlet of Mr. P. could not fail to add to them.

Apl. 1831.1

1 This appears to have been drafted by Madison as a postscript to his letter to Paulding, but it may have been sent separately. On June 6, 1831, he wrote Paulding again:

“Since my letter answering yours of Apl. 6 in which I requested you to make an inquiry concerning a small pamphlet of Charles Pinckney, printed at the close of the Fedl Convention of 1787, it has occurred to me that the pamphlet might not have been put in circulation, but only presented to his friends &c. In that way I may have become possessed of the copy to which I referred as in a damaged state. On this supposition the only chance of success must be among the Books &c. of individuals on the list of Mr. Pinckney's political associates & personal friends. Of those who belonged to N. Y. I recollect no one so likely to have recd. a copy as Rufus King. If that was the case, it may remain with his Representative, and I would suggest an informal resort to that quarter with a hope that you will pardon this further tax on your kindness.”— *Mad. MSS.*

Library of Congress

And on June 27:

“With your favor of the 20th inst. I recd. the Vol of pamphlets containing that of Mr. Chs. Pinckney, for which I am indebted to your obliging researches. The vol. shall be duly returned & in the mean time duly taken care of. I have not sufficiently examined the pamphlet in question, but have no doubt that it throws light on the object to which it has relation.

“I had previously recd. yours of the 13th, and must remark that you have not rightly seized the scope of what was said in mine of April—I did not mean that I had in view a *History* of any sort, public or personal; but only a preservation of materials, of which I happened to be a Recorder, or to be found in my voluminous correspondences with official associates or confidential friends. By the first I alluded particularly to the proceedings & debates of the latter periods of the Revolutionary Congress & of the Federal Convention in 1787; of which in both cases, I had as a member an opportunity of taking an account.”— *Mad. MSS.*